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THE POETRY OF FRANCIS THOMPSON:  
A RESOURCE FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

By

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Thesis

Submitted in the Department of  
The Philosophy of Religion  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of  
Bachelor of Divinity

In  
The Pacific School of Religion

1932



THE POETRY OF FRANCIS THOMPSON

A RESOURCE FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

INTRODUCTION

The need of resources for the spiritual life is apparent. We look out upon life to see it discordant, disunited, lacking in direction, and in poise.

In this age, the child, despite the efforts of well trained modern parents, is thrust into a frustrating society, a maelstrom of vitiating environment which is forced upon him from without. Although we have experienced a burst of accumulated knowledge, we have neither the leaders, nor the recognition of the few true ones there may be, to advance steadily from chaos to order.

In the field of economics we have the impossible combination of radically changed conditions with old methods and concepts. In the realm of education we have neither begun to orient ourselves to the demands of our day upon the individual, nor to employ the most elementary of insights which have become ours.

There is an apparent increase in mental ill health. And for every person who is completely incapacitated because of mental disease, there are many who enjoy only a part of the nervous stability which should normally be



theirs. Because of the impact experienced from our civilization we all, to more or less degree, suffer a lag of unfitness.

The causes which make this need for spiritual resource so imperative are not so readily recognizable. To distinguish them requires unprejudiced reflection. "There is evidence," writes William Fielding Ogburn, "of a lack of harmonious adjustment between modern culture and human nature, as seen particularly in the extent of neuroses and functional psychoses, and in certain social problems." (1) Here we have a general summary of our plight.

It is difficult to exaggerate the phenomenal extent of the changes which have brought about our western civilization, and the speed with which they have arrived. The consequences of these changes are far-reaching, and hard to grasp in their entire import.

No doubt the basic observation often made that we are living at the very climax of the industrial revolution is pertinent. The machine, intended as society's slave, has instead gained the upper hand. To mention only a single factor of economic effect,

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(1) Ogburn, Wm. Fielding, Social Change With Respect to Culture and Original Nature B. W. Huebsch, Inc. N. Y. p. 364



the inventor's dream of freedom from drudgery has turned into a nightmare of technological unemployment. The vibration of machines has caused unending repercussions in our socio-industrial nervous system. Well-being or catastrophe will mark whether we can withstand the shock as it shatters man individually, and in his social and international relations.

With this industrial-machine age, or as a part of it, goes an unprecedented mobility. Whereas but recently man enjoyed the same landscapes for a lifetime, and his family looked upon it for generations, he now travels miles per minute to become excited over the achievement of new speed records. Mobility has so greatly developed that as regards the care of dependents upon society, the treatment of anti-social individuals, and the education of the young, it has become a vexing social problem. Due to mobility our physical instability has become akin to that of the grasshopper. The danger lies in our nervous, intellectual, and emotional life striving to keep pace with our accelerated physical existence.

Further, our responses to life are dulled by the tendency to extremes and to abruptness constantly indulged. To suggest two specific examples which are hardly less than hellish in the extreme stimulus they force upon man, and are definitely the product of the present age,



consider modern advertising and urban traffic. The advertiser, due to the very nature of his aim, presents to the eye designedly arresting color clashes, a mixture of form sufficient to blind sensitive sight. The raucousness of mechanically induced sounds, - blatant, discordant, and harsh, maddens the well tuned ear. Small wonder that our eyes have been blinded and our ears deafened to the beautiful in sight and sound.

A somewhat more subtle influence must also be noted. The industrial-urban age in which we live, with its machines and its masses, has tended to develope a cultural pattern or type. Contrary to an earlier, and half mistaken conception, ideas and ideals do not always filter downward from the privileged few to permeate the bulk of society. They quite as potently, and may as often as not, push upward from the mass and find an articulate expression by the educated leaders, after they have become, it may have been unconsciously, influenced by the activity and thought from beneath them. Ideas are the result of life's organic process.

We are well on the way to a depersonalized, bulky, anti-individual expression of philosophy. It has its origin from the increasingly standardized pattern provided by our quantity enamoured civilization.



Such are certain of the well known characteristics of this age in which man must achieve his salvation. Who and what is man to enter upon such an undertaking? No true scientist despairs of man just because of his having come from the cave.<sup>(1)</sup> He knows to be sure that he has a certain biological inheritance. But he also

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(1)

H.B. Alexander in his Ode on the Generations of Man has expressed the truth poetically:

"Earth!  
Thou wert his Mother,  
Who was conceived within thy fiery womb  
Ere time began  
And by the laboring years brought forth  
Unto the stalwart stature of a Man, -  
Thou wert his body's Mother,  
As thou shalt be his dread  
And desert tomb  
When all thy myriad life is gone,  
And on and on  
Thou still dost keep  
An even pace, an even pace, though dead,  
With thy far-shining sisters of the Deep:  
Earth!  
Thou wert his Mother,  
But his high sire -  
First of the deathless gods - was of another  
And a lordlier line:  
Eros, of the glowing wings,  
Eros, dartler of desire,  
Bright son of Beauty, in whose blood divine  
There is immortal fever  
And such a quickening fire  
As glorifieth aye the tears of things  
And fresheneth Love forever."

-- H.B. Alexander, Odes and Lyrics, p.43.



knows the extreme changes in culture which this inheritance has weathered, more or less successfully in the last fifty thousand years or more. He knows that he must be partially understood through animal psychology. But he also knows that there are mysteries unique to man's psychology yet to be explained, that he is much the product of social inheritance, and that virtually nothing is known as to fundamental causation.

One of the most arresting facts as to man's original nature is his surprising adaptability. Our tremendous change of culture in a single generation has been met without absolute defeat.

This achievement is probably due in no small part to the fact, substantiated by psychological investigation, that original human nature is, above all, flexible. Human life's inherited urges are general. As summarized by Walter Marshall Horton in his book A Psychological Approach to Theology, four propositions as to human nature may be safely set forth:

- "1. We inherit from our human and animal ancestors a complex physical organism, equipped from the very start with protective devices, whose use does not have to be learned.
- "2. Not ready-made equipment, but learning capacity, is the major element in our biological heritage.
- "3. Many of the well-marked tendencies which are called instincts when they appear in other animals appear in us, too, in a more flexible form, as powerful impulsive drives, connected with characteristic emotions.



"4. Besides these rather specific impulsive drives, we are equipped with many general traits or aptitudes, characteristic of all men as men, but existing in various degrees in different individuals." (1)

Add to this fundamental characteristic of man's original nature the fact that he lives by ideas and ideals. The Gestalt School has made valuable contribution to our psychological knowledge by showing us how dependent the life process is upon complex patterns.

Especially as to inherited social culture is the pattern scheme, whereby we see the assimilation of a complex combination of reflexes, helpful. Students in the field of anthropology and biology have long seen the functioning of such pattern types as analyzed lately by psychologists to be patent.

We are constantly being urged to minimize the seriousness of our present situation. Despite the threatened catastrophic outcome for our society, with the root trouble lying imbedded in a deep divergence of original nature and arrived-at culture, men point with historical perspective to the fact that the contemporary age has been despaired of these thousands of years. And those with a cynical turn of mind will add, that coupled

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(1)

Walter Marshall Horton, A Psychological Approach to Theology, Harper Brothers, N.Y. 1931, pp. 45-47.



with this despair of the present is the backward look to a golden age (of course imaginary) when all was well, or the forward glimpse (of course an impossible ideal) when the new era will begin.

From the ancient literature of Babylonia, Egypt, Persia, and Palestine, we can catch mingled notes of despair as to the present state of affairs, or of hope as to the future.

"At the very dawn of history we find oppression and injustice and the reformer's conscience which attempted to end them." (1)

With these evidences of past hope and disappointment before them, men of today are apt to conclude that we are in about the same state as most civilizations in the past, not much better, but probably no worse, and that our mistake will lie in concerning ourselves over-much, or hoping at all.

We should not, however, because of these common urges, be led to minimize our present situation. Instead, we should mark the unique factor which sets our age apart. The difference lies in the fact that much of our perplexing condition is the result of changed and changing physical influences. In ages past, others have felt failure because of weakness in themselves, because of the misman-

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(1) C.C. McCown, The Genesis of the Social Gospel,  
A. Knopf, N.Y. 1929, p. 187 & chaps. 7, 8, 9.



agement of rulers, because of invasion from outsiders, or even because of urbanization or industrialization. Our strange situation, on the other hand, is largely the result of overpowering, impersonal, physical factors.

How we shall meet this seeming impasse of man, as he is confronted with his present civilization, is our problem. When man reaches his limit in perplexity, almost to despair; when strain and struggle have brought him to the end of his natural resources; when he is shaken with bursting creative effort; when he is overpowered with emotion; or when he is ennobled beyond expression with aesthetic experience of beauty; then it is that religion seems not infrequently to be his only satisfactory salvation to peace, poise, and expression.

The supreme religious genius, Jesus, in a time of crisis for his own people, came preaching a revolutionary ideal, the kingdom of God. There is no doubt that our paramount business now is to lend every effort to reshape society. To endeavor less would be to turn our backs ignobly upon the nobility of all past leaders who have challenged humanity's progress. Along with his ideal for society, however, Jesus also held forth the possibility for the individual to enter at once into an awareness of the eternal kingdom. He was invited immediately also to live as if the kingdom of which he dreamed had al-



ready arrived. Whether we translate "the kingdom is in your midst" or "the kingdom is within you" (which seems less likely), the sense may be the same, i.e. we need not await "a long far off divine event" for our initiation into eternal life. (1)

It is true that in acute individual cases of actual or approaching mental disease, good medical practise must recommend immediate and absolute change of environment, a total escape or retreat, so to speak, if the suffering person is to live again as a well man. But for the normal person, it should be clearly seen that there is no two-pathed choice between doing battle for the kingdom in the earth as one road, and self-controlled poise and inner peace as the other. The retreats of Jesus for reflection, for prayer, and for planning, were never for other than a recouping of spent energy, or the girding for further service. (2)

Any spiritual resource gained for another purpose than to carry on actual social conflict for the kingdom

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(1) This is the concept which finally comes to fruition (after several generations of experience and thought) in the Fourth Gospel.

(2) S.J. Case, Jesus and Sepphoris, Jour. of Bib. Lit., 1926. This article sets forth an interesting conjecture as to the possible early environment of Jesus in the city of Sepphoris, near Nazareth.



of Goodness is immediately auto-intoxicant. It must find an expansive expression in concretely improving the Society of Persons.

The disheartening reality, however, is that often a well meaning but inadequately nurtured intention surpasses the power and the resource with which it must be directed.

To effect a lasting progress, eternally built upon spiritual foundations, we shall need to have the leaven of more great souls. We need more thoughtful Socrates who prefer, in quiet self control, the hemlock; more Montaignes who are sufficiently free from passing quarrels to provide refuge for opposing factions; more Wiltons who come to do battle for social righteousness with purified inner eyes: more men devoted to the spirit of Him, who instead of personal success, chose the triumph of future Man, though it meant His death upon the cross.

There is no hope for social transformation and reconstruction through the agency of social control. It can only serve as means. Dynamic for achievement lies deeper. It rests in lives which are dedicated to unending ideals.

We would not minimize the sudden increase of worth which is brought about by the intelligent use of the literature to be found in the Bible. Through critical



study its life has been saved. It is the supreme treasure of religious experience. But it will in no wise completely serve all men.

Just as we are benefited by reaching outside of organized Christianity's traditional resources, intelligently as they may be utilized, so we should pour into organized Christianity itself added floods of life. Thus may we have new wine in our newly found wineskins.

A study of Francis Thompson will reveal that he rightly regarded himself as a priest through the medium of poetry. He approached nature and humanity with such spiritual insight that an appreciation of his poetry cannot fail to enrich our sense of spiritual reality.



## THE LIFE AND POETRY OF FRANCIS THOMSON

\*a swinging wicket set  
Between  
The Unseen and seen."  
F.T.

Interest in Francis Thompson steadily increases.

No more than a beginning has been made, however, in plumbing his depths for spiritual resource. His life and literary creation are clearly a unit: They cannot be understood apart from each other. They have much meaning when studied together.

Thompson had his training in four schools of life: first that of his well-meaning but misunderstanding home; second, the Roman Catholic religion; third, the Owens College of Medicine; and fourth, the city streets. Cynics will assert that the hardness and coldness of the city pavements won the final victory in claiming his death through tuberculosis, after he had been weakened by years of poverty and the use of opium. Men of sympathetic faith, upon the other hand, will claim, with equal assurance, that the school of supernatural influence, though it burst the narrow confines of the institutional religion which gave it birth, came to fullest expression in his art as a consequence of his Leynell-nursed redemption.



### I. Art the Product of Experience

Four insights bear us spiritual resource as we know the life and writing of Francis Thompson. The first is door to all the rest: that experience alone gives birth to all that's worth creating. Genius is enabled, through the veriest taste to know the whole. The pedagogic dictum of Confucius, "when I have presented one corner of a subject to anyone, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson"<sup>(1)</sup>, if applied to life's interpretation upon a higher plane, gives hint of the supreme artist's ability.

There are realms of experience in which Thompson seems to know all, yet which probably he but glimpsed from the threshold. Such, it seems to me, we may believe regarding much of his love poetry.

It is said of Dante, in whose lustre Thompson frequently grows more clear, that his entire creative life had as its emotional beginning a fleeting experience, which never passed beyond fond glances. Dante was never recognized by her of tender years whom later he transformed into his spiritual guide, that she might lead him to gaze upon glories inexpressible.

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(1) Annalects of Confucius, Bk. vii, Chap. VIII.



It has been hinted in quite unkind ignorance that Francis Thompson, along with other poets, was fortunate in having, (and perhaps coveted) the tragic legend of his life as a background upon which to etch his poetry.<sup>(1)</sup> Just as Rossetti buried his love poems with his wife, just as "the love letters of John Keats and Robert Browning preserve their verses sweet," just as "Byron vaunted through Europe the pageant of his bleeding heart," so it is argued Thompson took upon himself his terrible wrestling with the bleak powers of the city streets, and the release temporarily afforded through his use of opium. Thus is explained his sudden popularity. Sensitive souls will have none of this. Only stupid blindness will fail to see that it is but a fickle and light-headed public which leaps to acclaim a newly-fledged artist because of an extraordinary life.

Those who brood upon the true meaning of the matter will justly perceive that the romantic love which gave impulse to Rossetti's "sonnet burial" is the same impulse as that which made the sonnets possible of creation. The fire which blazed in Byron's romantic life became flaming beauty in his poetry; the rugged manhood which wooed

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(1) Eugene Mason, A Book of Preferences in Literature, E.P. Dutton, 1915.



Elizabeth Barrett alone made possible Robert Browning's strong and manly poetic expression of divinity. And as for Thompson - only a shallow mind will imagine him for any cause enduring the torments of a shattered life designedly.

The seven years spent at Ushaw, from his eleventh to his eighteenth year, made an indelible impression upon him. The following description from a schoolfellow will serve to show how he could not have escaped the imagery, the symbolism, and the ideology, which served later to carry to him inner spiritual truth.

"No Ushaw man need be told how eagerly all, both young and old, hailed the coming of the 1st of May. For that day, to the Seminary, was erected a colossal altar at the end of the ambulacrum nearest the belfry, fitted and adorned by loving zeal. Before this, after solemn procession from St. Aloysius', with lighted tapers, all assembled, professors and students, and sang a Marian hymn. In the college no less solemnity was observed. At a quarter past nine the whole house, from President downwards, assembled in our ante-chapel before our favorite statue. A hymn, selected and practised with great care, was sung in alternate verses by the choir in harmony, and the whole house in unison. 'Dignare me laudare, te, Virgo sacra,' was intoned by the Cantor; 'Da mihi virtutem contra hostes tuos' thundered back the whole congregation; and the priest, robed already for Benediction, sang the prayer, 'Concede, misericors Deus,' etc. Singing Our Lady's Magnificat, we filed into St. Cuthbert's, and then, as in the Seminary, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament followed. For thirty-one days, excepting Sundays and holy days, this inspiring ceremonial took place -- its memory can never be effaced."<sup>(1)</sup>

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(1) E. Meynell, The Life of Francis Thompson, p. 23 & 24



His parents were informed by Father Tatlock, President of Ushaw, that due to his "natural indolence" he should of necessity give up the priesthood, though he might, if he could free himself from his major fault, succeed in any career. It was, however, this early saturation with the externalities of the Christian religion which enabled him to find himself again, later, not being able to flee Him who

"....with unhurrying chase,  
And unperturbed pace,  
Deliberate speed, majestic instance"<sup>(1)</sup>

sought him.

No other life than his, experiencing loneliness in a good home because it failed to understand him, tutored in a school which, because of its very confining discipline, lacked room for him, sent by his parents to the technical school for medicine, failing that only to be launched in the hard and cold school of London's streets, could possibly have given birth to such deeply emotional flights as his The Hound of Heaven, A Judgment in Heaven, and The Kingdom of God.

Had he not known the imagery of the Roman Catholic religion as a living lover of it, daily observing his

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(1) Francis Thompson, The Hound of Heaven.



orders, though his priesthood was to be outside of the Church, the Ode to the Setting Sun could never have been glorified with such spiritual significance.

(1)

"O Setting Sun, that as in reverent days  
Sinkest in music to thy smoothed sleep,  
Discrowned of homage, though yet crowned with rays,  
Hymned not at harvest more, though reapers reap:

For thee this music wakes not. O deceived,  
If thou hear in these thoughtless harmonies  
A pious phantom of adorings reaved  
And echo of fair ancient flatteries!

Yet, in this field where the Cross planted reigns,  
I know not what strange passion bows my head  
To thee, whose great command upon my veins  
Proves thee a god for me not dead, not dead!

For worship it is too incredulous,  
For doubt -- oh, too believing-passionate!  
What wild divinity makes my heart thus  
A fount of most baptismal tears? -- Thy straight

Long beam lies steady on the Cross. Ah me!  
What secret would thy radiant finger show?  
Of thy bright mastership is this the key?  
Is this thy secret, then? And is it woe?"

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"Now with wan ray that other sun of Song  
Sets in the bleakening waters of my soul:  
One step, and lo! the Cross stands gaunt and long  
'Twixt me and yet bright skies, a presaged dole.

Even so, O Cross! thine is the victory.  
Thy roots are fast within our fairest fields;  
Brightness may emanate in Heaven from thee,  
Here thy dread symbol only shadow yields.

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(1) Italics indicate the use made of ecclesiastical imagery and language.



"Therefore, O tender Lady, Queen Mary,  
Thou gentleness that does enmoss and drape  
The Cross's rigorous austerity,  
Wipe thou the blood from wounds that needs must gape.

• • • • • • • • • • • • • • •

"No; while soul, sky, and music bleed together,  
Let me give thanks even for those griefs in me,  
The restless windward stirrings of whose feather  
Prove them the brood of immortality."

We may feel with Coventry Patmore that "Mr. Thompson's poetry is spiritual almost to a fault. He is always, even in love, upon the mountain heights of perception, where it is difficult for even disciplined mortality to breathe for long together."<sup>(1)</sup> But if we agree with such criticism, we should be wary lest we betray ourselves as children of an age not given to spiritual quest.

Had our poet not come with a life which had never known the experience of parenthood to the intimate joy of children's friendship in the Meynell home, he could never have written Little Jesus.

"Little Jesus, wast thou shy  
Once, and just so small as I?  
And what did it feel like to be  
Out of Heaven, and just like me?  
Didst Thou sometimes think of there  
And ask where all the angels were?  
I should think that I would cry  
For my house all made of sky;  
I would look about the air,  
And wonder where my angels were;

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(1) Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, p. 107.



"And at waking 'twould distress me --  
Not an angel there to dress me!  
Hadst Thou ever any toys,  
Like us little girls and boys?  
And didst Thou play in Heaven with all  
The angels that were not too tall,  
With stars for marbles? Did the things  
Play Can you see me? through their wings?  
And did Thy Mother let Thee spoil  
Thy robes, with playing on our soil?  
How nice to have them always new  
In Heaven, because 'twas quite clean blue!

Didst Thou kneel at night to pray  
And didst Thou join Thy hands, this way?  
And did they tire sometimes, being young,  
And make the prayer seem very long?  
And dost Thou like it best, that we  
Should join our hands to pray to Thee?  
I used to think, before I knew,  
The prayer not said unless we do.  
And did Thy Mother at the night  
Kiss Thee, and fold the clothes in right?  
And didst Thou feel quite good in bed,  
Kissed, and sweet, and thy prayers said?

Thou canst not have forgotten all  
That it feels like to be small;  
And Thou know'st I cannot pray  
To Thee in my father's way --  
When Thou wast so little, say,  
Couldst Thou talk Thy Father's way? --

So, a little Child, come down  
And hear a child's tongue like Thy own;  
Take me by the hand and walk  
And listen to my baby-talk,  
To Thy Father show my prayer  
(He will look, Thou art so fair),  
And say: 'O Father, I, Thy Son,  
Bring the prayer of a little one.'

And He will smile, that children's tongue  
Has not changed since Thou wast young!"

His own lonely childhood, no children of his own,

followed by his happy adoption into the Heynell Household,



where he grew so fond of Monica and Viola, help us to understand the sweetness of his poetic line, so fittingly placed upon his gravestone:

"Look for me in the nurseries of Heaven."<sup>(1)</sup>

Unless he had known sufferance and understanding at the hands of her who nursed him, when he was so beaten by life, he would not have thought in his poem A Judgment in Heaven to have Mary Magdalen (traditionally regarded as sinful) give the command to turn the suffering poet's robe,

"Never an eye looked mild on him 'mid all the  
    angel myriads ten,  
Save sinless Mary, and sinful Mary -- the Mary  
    titled Magdalen.  
'Turn yon robe' spake Magdalen, 'of torn bright  
    song, and see and feel.'  
They turned the raiment, felt and saw what their  
    turning did reveal --  
All the inner surface piled with bloodied hairs,  
    like hairs of steel."<sup>(2)</sup>

Only after triumphing over nights of human dereliction spent on the banks of the Thames in the shadow of Charing Cross could he have seen and sung The Kingdom of God, which in its treasure-bearing simplicity is second only to his Bound of Heaven. The poem closes,

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(1) John Thomson, Francis Thompson, the Preston Poet, p. 38.

(2) A Judgment in Heaven.



"But when so sad thou canst not sadder  
Cry; . . . . .

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry, -- clinging Heaven by the hems;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water;  
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!" (1)

## II. Sublimation

We may see in Thompson an example of the power of sublimation. Much of our higher life is developed through the process of sublimation. It need not be such a studiously employed philosophy of self-control as that once taught in Greece. It may not savor at all of the austerity usually associated with the asceticism developed in Monasticism. But it is diametrically opposed to indulgence for immediate pleasure.

H.A. Hutton has not, I fear, caught in his book, Guidance from Francis Thompson in Matters of Faith, the true spirit of the man. He sees in Thompson what he regards as the poet's secret source of great joy, as a prolonged expectation, which is never spoiled by actually completing the anticipated experience. It is rather, as Thompson explains in his Health and Holiness, "A Study of the Relations between Brother Ass, the Body, and his Rider, the Soul", in order that all may be controlled by holy will

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(1) Francis Thompson, Poems, Vol II, pp. 226 and 227.



from holy attitude.

It is thus that we see, as in Dante, an evolution of his love poetry from an expression of earthly delights to heavenly ecstasies. Our earthly life is of great significance only as it becomes a channel for divinity. Such a position will be regarded as adolescent nonsense or spiritual truth according to one's wisdom and purity.

It was not the constant thwarting and restraining of natural impulse, but rather its redirection toward a newly established goal, or the realization of some deeper meaning, which constituted the true sublimation to be seen in Thompson's work. It is, as he wrote, "Morality carried to the nth power."<sup>(1)</sup> For this he regarded as the true meaning of mysticism.<sup>(2)</sup> It is a following of the inner summons, wherever it may lead, to joy or sorrow, or perhaps to that which is more deeply known than either, which in its intensity is oblivious to either suffering or joy, but which may give rise to one or the other or to their strange intermixture. It is just this which Thompson knew: this intense, driven life.

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(1) Meynell, Life of Francis Thompson, p. 148.

(2) Southey had the same understanding of sublimation: "Religion is the perfection, refinement, and sublimation of morality."



### III. The Unconscious Expression of Art

This leads us to a third spiritual resource to be found in Thompson's poetry.

Just as in great music, such as that of Beethoven, and as in great religious leadership, such as that of the prophets of Israel, the creative expression of our poet is unconscious. This is not meant in any esoteric sense. Great art -- great music, great speech, great poetry -- is never directly the product of severe striving. It is a "frenzy".<sup>(1)</sup> It may involve great pain and leave its creator wrung to weakness, but it is not consciously sought after, and one wonders whether the truly heroic life must not be the same.

Not but that there are long nights of anguished striving after commitment to the highest. There are, inevitably. And in the case of Francis Thompson, we have an excellent study made for us by Legroz, showing that which went to make up the art which Thompson

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In Meynell's Life an observer is quoted as describing one such "frenzy": "You will be glad to hear that Francis has written an Ode which is longer than anything he has done yet. Also that the 'frenzy' being on him he has begun another poem yesterday. Of course he is flying over hill and dale and never to be seen ...." p.137.



perfected. (1)

The prophets uttered brave truth unparalleled for its far-seeing wisdom when they stood, unafraid, to proclaim in prophetic ecstasy their warnings to the nation. But it was only after they had spent long meditation and deep brooding thought upon the meaning and needs of their time. When they stood forth to speak they spoke better than they knew. They lost themselves and became the channels for divine judgments of righteousness.

#### IV. Redemption through Persons

Another spiritual resource to be found in Thompson, verified in both life and work, is the use God makes of persons to redeem persons. There were two major redemptive influences in his life. First there was the woman of the streets -- she who, after

"....the tardy dawn dragged me at length  
From under those dread wheels: and bled of strength

(1) R. L. Megroz, Francis Thompson, The Feet of Earth in Heaven. Megroz has made a probing study as to the roots which gave growth to the literary flower, Thompson. From his poetry through his prose and biography, he moved on to study his art, the poets who have shared in influencing him. The poetry of Christian love takes him to Latin sources, comprised of pagan and Christian medieval culture. The further influence of Greek tradition is pointed out, half of which Megroz regards as Asiatic.



"I waited the inevitable last.

.....came past

A child;.....a spring flower; but a flower  
Fallen from the budded coronal of Spring  
And through the city streets blown withering."

She carried him, in her cab, to her shelter, hardly more  
than that, and there cared for him.

"She passed - O brave, sad, lovingest, tender thing!  
And of her own scant pittance did she give  
That I might eat and live".<sup>(1)</sup>

After she had "fled, a swift and trackless fugitive",<sup>(2)</sup>  
he never escaped the haunting vacancy left by her, though  
she, wisely fled, knew him finally to be in the hands of  
people better able to help him than was she. In the  
Judgment of Heaven we learn the part she must have played,  
through her sympathetic understanding for him in his suf-  
fering. It was surely she whom he pictured as Mary  
Magdalene in the poem, inviting the Heavenly Judge

"'Take.....yon chaplet up, thrown down ruddied  
from his head.'  
They took the roseal chaplet up, and they  
stood astonished:  
Every leaf between their fingers, as they  
bruised it, burst and bled."

After the "Street Child" had sacrificially deserted  
him, the Meynells nursed, with loving care, the shoulder-

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(1) Quoted from Meynell, p. 64.

(2) Ibid.



ing fires of his genius. His dedication to them is one of the simplest and most sweetly touching expressions of gratitude ever penned. (1)

"TO WILFRID AND ALICE MEYNELL

If the rose in meek duty  
 May dedicate humbly  
 To her grower the beauty  
 Wherewith she is comely;  
 If the mine to the miner  
 The jewels that pined in it,  
 Earth to diviner  
 The springs he divined in it;  
 To the grapes the wine-pitcher  
 Their juice that was crushed in it,  
 Viol to its pitcher  
 The music lay hushed in it;  
 If the lips may pay Gladness  
 In laughter she wakened  
 And the heart to its sadness  
 Weeping unslakened,  
 If the hid and sealed coffer  
 Whose having not his is,  
 To the losers may proffer  
 Their finding -- here this is;  
 Their lives if all livers  
 To the Life of all living --  
 To you, O dear givers!  
 I give your own giving."

Its sentiment in poetry is only equalled by their lovingly revealing life of him in prose.

Having observed these four truths regarding the poet himself: first, that his literary creations come out of his life experience; second, that his art is the

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(1) The Works of Francis Thompson: Poems, Vol. I,  
Dedication.



product of lofty sublimation; third, that in its utterance it is unconscious; and fourth, that his redemption came through the love of other persons, let us turn to the spiritual resource which may be found in his poetry. For convenient study we may group his poems: first, about religious experience, and second, about nature.

#### V. Religious Experience

There is spiritual import in every verse of his poetry. I write advisedly. There is not always ecclesiastical significance, or anything for institutionalized religion (though there is almost an over-use of Churchly symbolism) but there is an emphasis which is more than material, more than physical, in all his work.

He never gave up the conception of himself as a priest. Though denied the privilege of completing his training for the Church and life-long ministration there, he constantly thought of himself as priest through poetry, showing to earth's inhabitants the sacraments of life latent in themselves. For him the experiences of life, its relationships, its seeming commonness, nature herself, could best be approached as revelations of God and spiritual reality. There is nothing that is not sacred.

Instead of seeing only the baptism taught within the Church, Thompson saw all about him the baptism of



nature's beauty, the baptism of human tears, and the dedication of one's powers to artistic creation.

The religious experience from which he was never free was that God is inescapable.

Here we need to discriminate. For the very thing which makes religious experience possible, idealism, is apt to make our attempted interpretation of such experience in another, misinterpretation.

Francis Thompson might never have seen the manifold manifestation of God upon every hand: in persons, in nature, and in pain, had he not been introduced to something about the reality of God in his earlier training. Had he not known something, even if superficially, about the Church's Virgin, the ecclesiastical Christ, and the theologian's God, he would probably not have laid the stringed instrument across which he might sweep the mighty bow of his greater revelation to produce the sublime music of a glorified and universal Presence.

When adherents of various beliefs draw near for the interpretation of this man's poetry, especially The Hound of Heaven, they are wrongly desirous of setting forth with exactitude his teaching. They do not realize that their most various insights are but the indication that his art and experience are truly universal. The Hound of Heaven intimates and breathes the very breath of heaven.



and earth united. Precisely because it is profound and universal poetic utterance, no specific understanding of it does it justice, nor exhausts its meaning.

### VII. Nature as Seen by Thompson

The most striking illustration of the effect of idealism in making God inescapable is to be seen in his nature poetry. Critics in an effort to evaluate Thompson's treatment of nature have for some mistaken reason concentrated upon his On Nature, Laud and Plaint, singling out for major consideration the "Plaint". If we were reading his Ode in entirety we should pay particular attention to the closing lines:

"This Lady (nature) is God's daughter, and  
she lends  
Her hand but to His friends,  
But to her Father's friends the hand which  
thou wouldest win;  
Then enter in,  
And here is that which shall for all make  
mends." (1)

In his "Plaint" he is obviously striking at what must be to a keen mind, a somewhat maudlin ascription of personality to impersonal nature:

"Hope not of Nature; she nor gives nor teaches;  
She suffers thee to take  
But what thine own hand reaches,  
And can itself make sovereign for thine ache.

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(1) The Works of Francis Thompson: Poems, Vol. II, p.167.



"Ah, hope not her to heal  
The ills she cannot feel,  
Or dry with many-businessed hand the tear  
Which never yet was weak  
In her unfretted eyes, on her uncared cheek.

O heart of Nature! Did man ever hear  
Thy yearned-for word, supposed dear?  
His pleading voice returns to him alone;  
He hears none other tone.  
No, no;  
Take back, O poets, your praises little-wise."<sup>(1)</sup>

When we are invited to the heart of nature by God, however, we find she has a throbbing heart indeed, and her voice can cause to reverberate divinest mysteries from the Soul of All. Seeing this, if we turn to the Sight and Insight collection, every page brings us spiritual nurture from the realm of nature.

In Contemplation the poet's own latent powers, waiting to burst forth in fruition, are brought puissantly to consciousness by contemplation of the freshly rain-bathed earth:

"This morning saw I, fled the shower,  
The earth reclining in a lull of power;  
The heavens, pursuing not their path,  
Lay stretched out naked after bath,  
Or so it seemed; field, water, tree,  
were still,  
Nor was there any purpose on the calm-browed hill."<sup>(2)</sup>

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(1) Ibid. pp. 165, 166.

(2) Ibid. p. 12.



But

"In skies that no man sees to move  
 Lurk untumultuous vortices of power,  
 For joy too native, and for agitation  
 Too instant, too entire for sense thereof,  
 . . . . .  
 For he, that conduit running wine of song,  
 Then to himself does most belong  
 When he his mortal house unbars  
 To the importunate and thronging feet  
 That round our corporeal walls unheeded beat;  
 Till, all containing, he exalt  
 His stature to the stars, or stars  
 Narrow their heaven to his fleshly vault:  
 When, like a city under ocean  
 To human things he grows a desolation,  
 And is made a habitation  
 For the fluctuous universe  
 To lave with unimpeded motion.  
 He scarcely frets the atmosphere  
 With breathing, and his body shares  
 The immobility of rocks;  
 His heart's a drop-well of tranquillity;  
 His mind more still is than the limbs of fear  
 And yet its unperturbed velocity  
 The spirit of the simoom mocks.  
 He round the solemn center of his soul  
 Wheels like a dervish, while his being is  
 Streamed with the set of the world's harmonies  
 In the long draft of whatsoever sphere  
 He lists the sweet and clear  
 Clangour of his high orbit on to roll,  
 So gracious is his heavenly grace;  
 And the bold stars does hear,  
 Every one in his airy soar,  
 For evermore  
 Shout to each other from the peaks of space,  
 As 'thwart ravines of azure shouts the  
 mountaineer."<sup>(1)</sup>

We are presented ethereal music in The Mistress of Vision. It is as though the artist's fingers had stroked to brilliance, with their repeated gentle caress, the inner gleaming visions of reality:

(1) Ibid. pp. 13, 14.



"Secret was the garden;  
 Set i' the pathless awe  
 Where no star its breath can draw.  
 Life, that is its warden  
 Sits behind the fosse of death. Mine eyes  
 saw not and I saw."

He depicts his lofty flight in the vivid imagery of Greek Mythology:

"O dismay!  
 I, a wingless mortal, sporting  
 With the tresses of the sun?  
 I, that dare my hand to lay  
 On the thunder in its snorting?  
 Ere begun,  
 Falls my singed song down the sky, even  
 the old Icarian way."

Divine paradox and his philosophy of pain and suffering are expressed in the same poem:

"Pierce thy heart to find the key;  
 With thee take  
 Only what none else would keep;  
 Learn to dream when thou dost wake,  
 Learn to wake when thou dost sleep.  
 Learn to water joy with tears,  
 Learn from fears to vanquish fears;  
 To hope, for thou dar'st not despair,  
 Exult, for that thou dar'st not grieve;  
 Plough thou the rock until it bear;  
 Know, for thou else couldst not believe;  
 Lose, that the lost thou may'st receive;  
 Die, for none other way canst live.  
 When earth and heaven lay down their veil,  
 And that apocalypse turns thee pale;  
 When thy seeing blindeth thee  
 To what thy fellow-mortals see;  
 When their sight to thee is sightless;  
 Their living, death; their light, most  
 lightless;  
 Search no more --  
 Pass the gates of Luthany, tread the region  
 Elenore."



The stanzas draw to a close with a turn upon the expression with which the poem began:

"Her tears made dulcet fretting  
 Her voice had no word,  
 More than thunder or the bird.  
 Yet, unforgetting,  
 The ravished soul her meanings knew. Mine ears  
 heard not, and I heard."

The evolution of our poet's spiritual pilgrimage is recapitulated most clearly in his Orient Ode. He opens with ecclesiastical imagery for portrayal of the Sun:

"Lo, in the sanctuaried East  
 Day, a dedicated priest  
 In all his robes pontifical exprest  
 Lifteth slowly, lifteth sweetly  
 From out its Orient tabernacle drawn  
 Yon orbed sacrament confest  
 Which sprinkles benediction through the dawn;  
 And when the grave procession's ceased,  
 The earth with due illustrious rite  
 Blessed -- ere the frail fingers featly  
 Of twilight, violet-cassocked acolyte,  
 His sacerdotal stoles unvest --  
 Sets, for high close of the mysterious feast,  
 The sun in august exposition meetly  
 Within the flaming monstrance of the West."

He continues in outpouring adoration:

"Thou art the incarnated Light  
 Whose Sire is aboriginal, and beyond  
 Death and resurgence of our day and night;  
 From him is thy vicegerent wand  
 With double potency of the black and white  
 Giver of Love, and Beauty, and Desire,  
 The terror, and the loveliness, and purging,  
 The deathfulness and lifefulness of fire!  
 .  
 By her, the Woman, does Earth live, O Lord,  
 Yet she for Earth and both in Thee."



"Light out of Light!  
 Resplendent and prevailing Word  
 Of the Unheard!  
 Not unto thee, great Image, not to thee  
 Did the wise heathen bend an idle knee;  
 And in an age of faith grown frore  
 If I too shall adore  
 Be it accounted unto me  
 A bright sciential idolatry!  
 God has given thee visible thunders  
 To utter thine apocalypse of wonders;  
 And what want I of prophecy  
 That at the sounding from thy station  
 Of thy flagrant trumpet, see  
 The seals ~~test~~ <sup>test</sup> felt, the open revelation?"<sup>(1)</sup>

He closes in universal spiritual implication, our priest through poetry, with straight upward flight, which pierces with divine insight to the very depths of heaven:

"Thou, for the life of all that live  
 The victim daily born and sacrificed;  
 To whom the pinion of this longing verse  
 Beats but with fire which first thyself  
 did give,  
 To thee, O Sun -- or is't perchance, to  
 Christ?

Aye, if men say that on all high heavn's face  
 The saintly signs I trace  
 Which round my stoled altars hold their  
 solemn place  
 Amen, amen! For oh, how could it be, --  
 When I with winged feet had run  
 Through all the windy earth about,  
 Quested its secret of the sun,  
 And heard what things the stars together  
 shout --  
 I should not heed thereout  
 Consenting counsel won: --  
 'By this, O Singer, know we if thou see.

(1)

Ibid. pp. 23, 24, 25.



"When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is here,  
When men shall say to thee: Lo! Christ is there,  
Believe them: yea, and this -- then art thou seer  
When all thy crying clear  
Is but: Lo here! lo there! -- ah me, lo everywhere!" (1)

We can perceive depth of philosophical insight in this significant line from From the Night of Forebeing:

"Love that is child of Beauty and of Awe."

Echoes of fleetingly achieved sainthood, sustaining joy from his belief in a loving God, come to us from Any Saint:

When He bends down, sun-wise,  
Intemperable eyes;  
Most proud,  
When utterly bowed,

To feel thyself and be  
His dear nonentity --  
Caught  
Beyond human thought

In the thunder-spout of Him  
Until thy being dim,  
And be  
Dead deathlessly." (2)

With all his poetic soaring, there is a note of clarity and practicality. In his writings he stated that unless what was sung in poetry could be reduced to plain and clearly stated prose, it was not worthy of the poet.

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(1) Ibid. pp. 27, 28.

(2) Ibid. pp. 50, 51.



Critics have seen that his prose is equal to most poetry, and that his poetry seldom loses directness of expression. So as a part of his flight of insight, in Retrospect he sees clearly and practically, that unless

".... True orient, Christ  
Make not His cloud of thee,  
I have sung vanity  
And nothing well devised." (1)

All his poetry, and his insight, is a pilgrimage:

"Therefore I do repent  
That with religion vain  
And misconceived pain  
I have my music bent  
To waste on bootless things its  
skiey-gendered rain;  
Yet shall a wiser day  
Fulfil more heavenly way  
And with approved music clear this slip  
I trust in God most sweet  
Meantime the silent lip,  
Meantime the climbing feet." (2)

## VII. The Hound of Heaven

A few years' intimate acquaintance with Francis Thompson's The Hound of Heaven tempts one to the use of ultimate superlatives. (3) The poem is not purely original.

(1) *Ibid.* p. 70

(2) *Ibid.* p. 71

(3) That which Darrell Figgis writes in appreciation of Thompson's poem containing the line, "She sees the Is beyond the Seems", might equally well apply to The Hound of Heaven. "There is no renunciation in that song; it is pure solution, wherein symbols and reality merge, and faith is justified by its vision, for the Seen takes its just value in a world of tuition, as well as intuition. Its simplicity of speech, too, is in significant contrast with the troubled tumult of much of his song. Yet all his song marks the way he went; and its Gothic splendour, typifying his spiritual adventure, has a high place in the Poetry that is also Prophecy." Figgis, Byways of Study, p. 43.



Nothing is save God. It has its counterpart more briefly sung in the 139th Psalm, verses 7 - 12:

"Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?  
Or whither shall I flee from thy presence?  
If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there:  
If I make my bed in the grave, behold thou art  
there.  
If I take the wings of the morning,  
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea;  
Even there shall thy hand lead me,  
And thy right hand shall hold me.  
If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me;  
Even the night shall be light about me.  
Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee;  
But the night shineth as the day:  
The darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

Paul Elmer More rightly sees Thompson's indebtedness for its motif in Greek sources.

The form of the poem is most remarkable and moving. It is not at all surprising that within a few years after its publication it was arranged for presentation by a musical chorus.

Throughout all our poet's verse there are linguistic affinities, philosophical fragments, and experiential glimmerings which are brought to a completed unity in the masterpiece. In The Found of Heaven there is everything: nature, children, mind, spirit, seeing, hearing, singing, sighing, all of which are brought to the focal point -- the loving and inescapable God. There is majestic conception, dizzy height, overpowering intimacy, empowering revelation, all presented with an artistry so



unconscious and free and so masterful, that once this poem is "learned by heart" it has immeasurable capacity for leading men to God.

For it is the beautiful description of the poet's most intimate experience as he fled "the Hound of Heaven" into the various realms of half existence. He tells us how he fled Him into the emotions of joy, sorrow, and hope; how he endeavored to escape Him in the world of the mind; how he attempted to compromise with the Eternal by enjoying human happiness and love;

"But if one little casement parted wide  
The gust of His approach would clash it to."

Freedom was sought in the heights of the starry universe,

"Across the margin of the universe I fled...."  
In human companionship, in the love of little children, but

"Their angels plucked them from him, by the hair."

He fled to nature:

"But not by that, by that, was eased my human heart  
In vain my tears were wet on Heaven's gray cheek."

Very clearly he describes his utter abjection, but even here in this ultimate extremity he is hounded by intimations of the divine principle expressed in his question,

"...must thou char the wood 'ere  
Thou canst limn with it?"



Reduced in his own human eyes to the least possible worth there is expression of the theme of A Judgment in Heaven, for he comes to be seen with God's eyes, in Whose divine gaze he knows he is the recipient of yearning love. He knows that all the suffering endured is but the

"Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly," that all has meaning, all has purpose, all shelters him once he clasps the extended hand of God. Finally he hears His voice saying:

"...fondest, blindest, weakest  
I am He whom thou seekest  
Thou dravest love from thee who dravest Me."



## CONCLUSION

Paul Elmer More believes that much of Francis Thompson's attempted soaring is but the beating of wings against the earth. There is praise admitted for The Hound of Heaven, although he feels that it is mixed in its conception, and that after its opening stanza, the height of its expression is lessened. Its value lies for More in teaching Protestantism, the weakness of substituting humanity and charity for the all-consuming theme, God.<sup>(1)</sup>

This is another begging of the time-worn question as to whether our major interest and concern should be for God or for man. A true appreciation of Francis Thompson will show the solution to be not "either-or", but rather a realization that service of man and love of God are complements of the one reality.

"This commandment I give unto you...;...<sup>(2)</sup>  
And the second is like unto it...."

The revelation of God everywhere in the universe: in the realm of nature, in the world of people, and in the experience of life, is the burden of Thompson's song.

In his last poem, still unpolished at his death, which he originally entitled In No Strange Land, The Kingdom of God Is within You", he expresses in simple and direct language a summary expression of the truth

(1) Paul Elmer More, Shelburne Essays.

(2) Sayings of Jesus, New Testament.



which endured after his religious experience so poignantly described in The Hound of Heaven:

#### THE KINGDOM OF GOD

"O world invisible, we view thee,  
O world intangible, we touch thee,  
O world unknowable, we know thee,  
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!"

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,  
The eagle plunge to find the air --  
That we ask of the stars in motion  
If they have rumor of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,  
And our benumbed conceiving soars! --  
The drift of pinions would we harken,  
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places; --  
Turn but a stone and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,  
That miss the many splendoured thing.

But when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry; -- and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry, -- clinging heaven by the hem;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water  
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!"

There can be no escape from God. He is upon every hand. There can be no rest, until He is made a welcome guest in the life of man. Always there will be the haunting need, the gnawing vacancy, the yearning dissatisfaction, until there is recognition of the Eternal One.



When once He is admitted, however, all else becomes real. Nature, children, human love: all experience then has its true perspective and consequence.

Such is the spiritual message of Thompson and his poetry. He lived a life of pain. But in his life and in his song, he expressed supremely the reality of the life of the spirit.



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